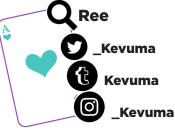


#### MODS - COVER





#### **WRITERS**

EvilMuffins - Waste Paper
mikan\_komaeda
evil-muffins

evilmuffins

Catastrophe - You're what I dream about when I sleep saioumapologist

kittytastrophe

Rovelae - This Time Around

Rovelae

Rovelae

Rovelae

Hope - Fresh Cut kokichiouma furuderika

kokichiouma





#### MERCH











































































### FRESH CUT

A story about their wounds, both new and old, and how far the two of them have come since the killing game ended.

In the middle of preparing dinner, he makes a simple mistake—one that anyone might make. The knife in his right hand nicks against the fingers of his left, and blood wells up from the open wound, the sensation sharp and stinging.

Try as he might not to give any indication that something was wrong, Ouma can't help but hiss a breath through his teeth as he tries not to yelp from the pain. And that was all it took to alert the sharp-eared detective sitting in the next room over, apparently. Well that, and the fact that he dropped the knife to the floor when he grabbed his bloody fingers.

"What's wrong?" Saihara Shuichi rushes up to him, concern all over his face. "I thought I heard something... Wait, is that blood?"

The other boy's face pales at the sight, and although it's really only a little bit of blood, Ouma understands his reaction all too well. After all, they had already seen more than enough blood for a lifetime—even if it was only in a fake world.

"I'm fine," he lies instinctively, still clutching his two bloody fingers close to his chest. They were probably staining his shirt now. Oops. "Just a little cut, see? No big deal. I thought, maybe this was the best way to add some spice to our dinner."

It's just a joke, a blithe attempt to lighten the mood and take their minds off the blood that is slowly drip, drip, dripping its way onto the white tile floor, but Saihara doesn't look pleased at all. "Let me see." It's not a question; he approaches before Ouma can even attempt to dodge him, and gently brings his hand close enough to examine. "Ugh, that looks bad..."

"What are you, a nurse? Don't tell me Team Danganronpa took your detective skills away at some point and gave you some backstory about being the Ultimate Nurse instead." He feigns exasperation with a roll of his eyes but it's a lie, and he's pretty sure the detective knows as much.

"Wait here," Saihara tells him. "Let me patch you up, okay?"

That must not have been a question either, because before Ouma can even protest, the other boy is already off and down the hall, probably looking for the small first-aid kit that they keep under the sink in the bathroom.

In the minute or so that he's left alone, he considers being difficult. It'd be easy to high-tail it, maybe go for a walk outside and get some fresh air; as long as he kept enough pressure on his fingers to stop the bleeding, it shouldn't really matter when he came back. He'd dealt with his fair share of cuts and bruises before. This was hardly something worth worrying about.

But the sounds of careful rummaging in the other room, along with the memory of that concerned, ghostly pale look that Saihara had given him, are enough to give him a moment's pause—and that moment of hesitation means the detective comes back before he can go anywhere, toting the first-aid kit with him.

Ouma clicks his tongue and gives up. To be fair, he'd considered just walking out that door and never coming back at least twice a day, ever since they'd moved in together. *Oh well*, he thinks, *I guess I can always put it off until tomorrow.* 

Saihara guides him over to the small kitchen table in the corner of the room, and for the next few moments, there's only the sound of the other boy sifting through the first-aid kit as he carefully pulls out cotton, disinfectant, and a roll of gauze.

The disinfectant goes on first, and although the pressure of the cotton against the open wound is gentle, it arguably hurts even more than the knife itself. Ouma can feel all the blood drain from his face as he tries not to wince.

Unfortunately, nothing seemed to slip past Mr. Nosy Detective either. "Are you okay?" Saihara asks. "Sorry, I should've warned you that it was going to sting."

"I'm fine," Ouma says with a tight, thin smile. "It didn't hurt one bit." Of course, it's a blatant lie. If he'd truly been okay, he probably would've shown the opposite reaction and bawled his eyes out.

Even more unfortunately, Saihara was probably aware of that, too. Which was exactly why he'd looked so apologetic, and exactly why Ouma had wanted to run away.

Saihara lowers his eyes and goes back to tending his wound, still carefully dabbing disinfectant here and there. After another few moments of the silence, he mumbles, "You're not laughing this time."

The words were hard to catch, almost as though he'd been talking to himself instead, but Ouma can't help but reply anyway. "You think I should be laughing? I mean, it's a weird request, but if that's what you want—"

"No, no, I just... Remember, the last time this happened? You were laughing, like you didn't have a care in the world. I always thought it was strange."

Did he *remember*? How could he possibly forget? He remembered every single thing that had ever happened to him during that god-awful game in excruciating detail. Those memories would play themselves out on the backs of his eyelids without permission, somehow indistinct and yet crystal clear at the exact same time. As if it had happened to someone else entirely, even though he could remember it all as if it were only yesterday.

Most of the time, they lived their quaint little domestic life trying to avoid acknowledging the Big Terrible Thing that had happened to them as much as possible. If one of them did mention anything that had taken place "back then," it was often during a fight, or due to a slip of the tongue.

Ouma is more than a little surprised to hear Saihara bring it up now—moreso when he doesn't seem to be tripping over himself to take it back. So it wasn't an accident, then.

"...I guess I remember," he says, his words light and his tone noncommittal, "more or less. Why don't you jog my memory a little? I can't really know what time you're referring to if you're not more specific."

Saihara sighs and indulges him. "The last time that I bandaged your hand up."

"Hmm... I get injured all the time, though. Y'know, since I'm such a klutz."

"It was the exact same fingers, on the exact same hand."

Ouma pretends to give it some thought for all of a minute and a half. "Mm, no, can't say you're ringing any bells."

"Come on, Ouma-kun. I'm being serious here."

"So am I!" Ouma says, as though hurt that the detective could possibly believe any different. "I'm *seriously* trying my best to remember, and you won't even give me a good hint to go on."

"It was back when you used to say you were going to kill me," Saihara says flatly.

"Oh, that time. See, you should've just said that from the start."

Saihara manages to wipe the last bit of blood off his injured fingers and begins carefully wrapping the gauze around them instead. "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up." There's a brief pause. "I just... I don't want to think that it was *all* bad. You know... what happened to us."

But then again... weren't all lies for the sake of the person telling them? It's not like he doesn't understand.

"...It wasn't." The words come from him reluctantly, after a moment or two of hesitation. "All bad, I mean. Maybe one or two good things happened, like meeting this super-annoying, nosy detective who won't leave me alone..."

The joke actually gets a wry smile from the detective in question. "I could say the same about a certain Supreme Leader who keeps lying all the time."

"Oh, please. You love me. Why else would you keep sticking around when I already tried everything in my power to scare you off."

The final piece of gauze goes on, and Saihara deftly tapes it in place. He tugs to make sure it doesn't come loose, looking relieved when it stays firm. Ouma waits patiently for a comeback of some sort—and is completely bewildered instead when the detective takes his bandaged fingers and gently kisses them.

"I guess you're right." Saihara finally lets his hand go and smiles. "You did say something or other about 'stealing my heart,' back then, so it makes sense."

"You're embarrassing," Ouma says, snatching his hand back. "And messed up."

"You're the one who asked me to stay by your side until I understood you better." The other boy shrugs. "I guess you're still stuck with me, for now."

*It's the other way around, stupid,* Ouma wants to say. But he doesn't. Every day, they move a little more past the Big Terrible Thing that happened to them, and every day, Saihara gets a little closer to really, truly understanding him. Maybe one day, the thought of that actually happening would stop terrifying him.

For now, all he says is, "Just promise me you'll patch me up again the next time I get cut." A promise like that might give him an incentive to stick around for longer than one day at a time. "I did tell you I'm a klutz, after all."

# THIS TIME AROUND

"In an effort to minimize psychological trauma, it is Team Danganronpa's policy to erase the memories of everyone who experiences death during their participation in their Killing School Semester. Essentially, their personalities will be re-downloaded into their bodies so that they can begin their new lives in as stress-free an environment as possible.

"For your own sake as well as theirs, please do not expect to rekindle old friendships and/or relationships with deceased (and subsequently reset) participants. They do not remember you."

A mercy, they called it.

A hard reset. A second chance for the blackened and victims alike, erasing their memories and all the trauma attached.

To Shuichi, it was just Team Danganronpa's way of taking even more from him.

Maybe that was a selfish way to think—after all, not a day went by that Shuichi didn't wish he could forget everything he witnessed in the killing game, so, in a way, he envied those who had died in the simulation.

But still—when he'd walked into the common area and Kaito greeted him with a *Hi there! I'm Kaito Momota, Luminary of the Stars!* and Kaede had laughed and asked, *What's your name?*—None of his friends even recognizing his face, after everything they'd been through—

"It's your move, you know."

Shuichi jumped and looked up to where Kokichi sat across the table from him, chin propped up in one hand, idly inspecting the fingernails of the other. "Ah... sorry," he mumbled, looking down at the chessboard. Kokichi's wall of pawns remained as unyielding as ever. He shifted a bishop toward the middle of the playing field.

Almost before his hand left the piece, Kokichi moved his knight. "Check."

Shuichi winced. "I should have seen that coming."

"No kidding," Kokichi drawled, twirling Shuichi's second rook in his fingers.

Shuichi moved his king behind a pawn and bit his lip. Meeting Kokichi again was the hardest part, because he'd expected resentment. He'd expected hurt, or anger, or the blank stare Kokichi always put between himself and someone he didn't trust. Instead, he'd gotten... this, this suspicion of a different flavor; Kokichi had at least thought of him as a potential ally the first time, but now, he saw Shuichi as just another Future Foundation member keeping him in the hospital against his will.

It didn't help that the Foundation wasn't letting Shuichi explain anything....

"Check," Kokichi said, as if he'd repeated it several times already. "Geez, you don't have to keep playing if you hate it this much."

"I don't hate it, I just...." Shuichi sighed and moved his bishop back to take the brunt of Kokichi's attack. "I'm sorry, I just have a lot on my mind."

Kokichi hummed, tilting his head, and captured one of Shuichi's pawns. "Thinking about me, Mr. Detective?" he said with a brilliant smile, and Shuichi choked on air.

"No! I mean—well, yes, but—but it's not like—"

"So you never think about me?" Violet eyes filled with tears, and Kokichi faceplanted into his folded arms on the table, narrowly missing the game board. "Shuichi hates me!" he wailed. "Shuichi wants me dead!"

Shuichi had seen this routine enough times not to be taken in by it, but the words still sent an unexpected pang through his chest. What if Kokichi had seriously thought that, back in the game?

What if, inside that machine—?

"Normally I get a better reaction than that," Kokichi grumbled, all traces of tears vanishing the moment he lifted his head, "but you look like you're about to tell me you hit my dog with a truck."

"Sorry," Shuichi said. He felt like he apologized a lot, these days. "I, um... was just thinking about the accident."

"Ah, yes, the mysterious and not-at-all-vague accident," Kokichi mused, and Shuichi held back a grimace. The Foundation's story was a shoddy coverup, yes, but really the best they could do. "Don't tell me you're pitying me for something I can't even remember."

"You wouldn't appreciate pity," Shuichi said quietly.

"Is it guilt, then? Are you responsible for what happened?"

"Not-no, I-"

"Do I have a reason to resent you?" Kokichi wore a disarming smile, but his eyes were sharp, calculating. "What was I to you, anyway? A friend?"

The pang in Shuichi's chest returned as he realized he couldn't exactly agree. Not with the fourth trial festering in his memory.

And then, not when he remembered standing in Kokichi's dorm room, with its obsessive collection of evidence from past trials, its scattered papers full of morbid, unsolvable suicide plots, or his own picture set aside on a whiteboard, captioned only by a tentative *Trustworthy?*—That moment when Shuichi had finally understood that he'd never understand Kokichi Ouma.

Kokichi nodded slowly. "Ah. An enemy, then."

That wasn't right, either, but Shuichi couldn't find the words to refute it. He'd never hated Kokichi; there was just... so much he didn't know, so much he'd wished he'd tried harder to understand. Why didn't you ask for help? Why did you decide that... that was your only choice?

Could I have changed your mind? Would you have let me?

Kokichi didn't even remember him, he reminded himself bitterly. Whatever they had or hadn't been was as good as gone.

He stood and excused himself in a shaky mumble, hoping Kokichi didn't notice the tears stinging his eyes.

"Mister Detective!" Kokichi chirped when Shuichi opened the door to his room after far too long spent pacing in his own. "What an expected and unpleasant surprise!"

Shuichi exhaled, the knot in his stomach tightening. "Kokichi, I know you're mad, and I know you have no reason to trust me, but—"

"Wooow, is that your legendary Ultimate Detective's intuition or are you psychic?"

"—But can we talk for a minute?"

"If you're not going to tell me anything useful, I'm not interested!" Kokichi made a shooing motion. "Out of my sight, peasant, or I'll have you executed!"

Shuichi hated that the word alone made him recoil. "I just want to help! Why would you even say that?"

"Because," Kokichi said, flipping to a different page in the notebook he'd been writing in, the exaggerated grandiosity vanishing, "that's the *fifth* time someone's reacted disproportionately strongly to me mentioning violence or death. You probably wouldn't be so agitated if I'd been in, say, a car crash, which makes me think this *accident* I keep hearing so much about was a lot more intentional than you want us to believe." He scribbled something on the page and shot him the same look he used to give Monokuma when the bear had let an important clue slip. "Interesting."

Kokichi was a monument to Team Danganronpa's hubris, Shuichi reflected. In their rush to make characters that would interest their fans, they made one too self-aware. Too perceptive, smart enough to start the domino effect that would tear their franchise apart.

It stung that that fierce intelligence considered him an enemy.

Please stop looking at me like that, he wanted to say. Please, let me help. Trust me again, if only as little as before.

"Why are you here, Shuichi?" Kokichi asked.

Because I want to know you, Kokichi.

"What would you believe?" he said instead, and Kokichi smirked.

"Good point."

Shuichi stared at the floor, searching for the words he'd been rehearsing for the past hour. "They won't let me tell you anything," he began. "They want to see if you'll recover your memories on your own before they tell you the truth all at once. It's supposed to be less traumatic that way."

"So they've said."

"But...." He let out a breath. "They never said I couldn't give you the occasional clue."

Kokichi stilled.

Shuichi had his attention now, he knew; the Supreme Leader was wearing the practiced neutral expression that meant he was thinking *very carefully.* 

"What's in it for you?" Kokichi asked.

"Closure?" Shuichi tried, earning another smirk. "So, um... what are you most eager to know? I'll see how I can help."

Kokichi chewed the end of his pen, still studying him with intense, narrowed eyes.

"You were there, weren't you," he said.

Shuichi felt a chill.

"How did...." His throat felt dry. "What makes you say—"

"I've seen it." Kokichi's hand came up to grip his upper arm as if he could still feel the phantasm of an arrow there. "I dream it, or I get these... flashes of déjà vu. And I keep seeing *you* there. Why do I remember you, *Shuichi Saihara?* Why—" He cut off, expression unfocused and far too haunted. "Why can't I get you out of my head?" he whispered.

Slowly, Shuichi stepped closer, then closer again when Kokichi didn't react, until he could sit beside him on the bed. "Are there good memories, too?"

"Sometimes," Kokichi muttered. "Mostly just confusing."

Shuichi folded his hands in his lap. "Um. For the record... that's not supposed to be happening yet."

"Hm."

"I...." He closed his eyes briefly. "I was there."

"But you didn't forget."

"...No."

"Which means you're probably masterminding this whole situation."

Shuichi bit back a protest, reminding himself that suspicion came about as naturally to Kokichi as lying. "That's possible," he allowed. "Or I'm telling the truth and I want to help you."

"And why would you want to help?"

"Because last time I didn't."

That seemed to take him by surprise. Kokichi turned those searching eyes on him again, but this time, they held something softer. Something... yearning.

"This is a second chance for both of us," Shuichi said. "I want to move on from what happened. I want to heal, and ... and I want to heal *with you*." He swallowed thickly. "I want us to be more than just... victims of the same tragedy."

*I* want to be important to you.

Kokichi was quiet for a long time.

Finally, "I can't figure you out, Shuichi."

"You've told me before," Shuichi said with a smile.

"I guess I'll have to play along until I do," Kokichi said, and held out his hand. "It doesn't sound too boring, anyway."

He was sure the shock showed on his face, because Kokichi's sly grin widened into something a little more genuine. Still, Shuichi took his hand without hesitation, and it was just as warm and human as he'd known it would be.

### WASTE PAPER

After learning of the 'horse a' message scribbled on a rock in the courtyard, Saihara attempts to communicate with whoever had left it. In return he gains a mysterious new penpal...

"Better stick with the detective work, kiddo!" His uncle would crack a smirk as he glanced over at Saihara's desk, spying the small mountain of crumpled paper littering the surrounding area everywhere but the office trash bin. "Because you're certainly not going to make it on the basketball court anytime soon."

As if taking revenge for its fallen comrades, the neon yellow paper sliced across Saihara's finger just as he began to crumple it. With a defeated sigh, he leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes before they could catch sight of the ceiling that most certainly did not belong to the cozy spare room he had occupied in his uncle's house mere days earlier.

Who are you?

What do you want from us?

What is 'Horse A'?

It had been days since the cryptic scribble had been discovered out in the grass--so much had transpired--and yet the message continued to nag at Saihara. Once a mystery fell into his lap, there was no putting it out of his mind, despite his attempts to convince himself of the fact that there were much more dire considerations at the moment.

Shifting upright, Saihara stuck the crumpled post-it note to the top of his desk, attempting to smooth it out as best he could. Even if he had attempted to toss it, it wouldn't have made the can anyway.

Not only content to be a terrible shot, Saihara Shuuichi also fancied himself as something of a master when it came to the art of utter failure in communication with his fellow human beings. Even short memos left for his uncle had at times been a struggle. Picking the right words was stress-inducing on a good day, but one wrong move here could throw everyone into danger. While the 'Horse A' message could have been left by whoever had previously attended the school before the arrival of the current student body, there was also a very strong possibility that it had been left for them to discover by the Mastermind.

In one decisive stroke, Saihara completed the message he had originally meant to discard:

'I want to talk'

Saihara was thankful for the lack of rain underneath the dome. Unless it was disturbed by one of the other students, his note would remain stuck to the stone, awaiting a response unlikely to ever appear.

No one would miss him if Saihara took a short detour on the way to breakfast. In fact, he wasn't even sure if anyone would come looking for him if he failed to show up entirely.

Putting any expectations aside, Saihara approached the stone. The note had vanished.

Sweat prickling at his palms, the possibility of one of the other students having picked it up immediately ran through his mind. It was completely possible that Gonta had come back and taken it to bring up during breakfast. There was nothing at all implausible about that scenario. And yet, the same little voice in the back of Saihara's head that sometimes whispered to him about a clue to be discovered--or a deadend to avoid--knew very well that the intended recipient had come across it.

So that was it. Whoever it was likely would refuse to communicate until he solved the code scratched into the rock. Unfortunately, Saihara still had not even the most basic inkling of what 'horse a' could possibly refer to.

Already resigned to another sleepless night even before breakfast, Saihara made his way toward the dining hall.

'Chatty are we?'

A small, bright yellow square was stuck to the dining hall's outer entrance. A sticky note. Saihara peeled it off the door, flipping it over as if the back side would contain anything other than a line of tacky glue.

He didn't know what he had expected, really. That the mastermind--if that were truly who he was speaking to--would suddenly confess their identity, freely spilling all of their secrets? Saihara knew that he should feel lucky to even have gotten the simple one-line reply in return at all.

Skipping breakfast, Saihara spent the entirety of his morning hunched over the desk in his room.

'What's your favorite kind of icecream?'

It was a ridiculous question, nothing short of childish, and yet it was the first and most innocuous thing he could think to ask. Anything too personal or direct could run the risk of driving his mysterious new penpal away.

Now, of course, the question arose of just where to leave it. Anywhere too obvious, and one of the other students would discover it. If this person truly were the mastermind, surely they would notice if something were out of place.

That night, one book downstairs in the library was left pulled slightly outward compared to its neighbors on the shelf.

A scrap of paper floating in the pool, a single word scribbled on the boys' room mirror in lipstick, a stack of blank papers on a warehouse shelf concealing a single printed sheet.

Each question and subsequent answer were nothing short of small talk, yet the daily hunt for each fresh note proved a welcome distraction that Saihara found far more agreeable than solving the murder of Ryoma Hoshi hours prior.

The mastermind was *funny*. They were charming and lively in a way that Saihara could only hope to be.

Each night, as Saihara would stow the newest note away in his desk drawer just before bed, he couldn't help but feel a smile brighten his weary face.

Ouma Kokichi was the mastermind.

Saihara's inards roiled, heart and mind alike melding into a molten ball made up of equal parts realization, disbelief, and the horrible notion that he should have known all along. During the entirety of their free moments spent together, Saihara had always thought that Ouma's constant torrent of lies were nothing more than mere mischievousness, a playfulness that he had to admit to having grown more than a little fond of.

How much of it had been a lie, then? Each and every note between them—the very same ones that had lifted his spirits following every new horror bestowed upon the group—was now cast into doubt.

While Saihara had carried little doubt in his mind that he had been conversing with the mastermind the entire time, the fact their true identity had been Ouma suddenly rocketed even the most inane sliver of information onto a planet of doubt.

'My favorite flavor is black sesame, of course!'

'Eh, I'm more of a dog person, really. If the choice wasn't only between the two, I'd actually have to go with a horse, of course!'

Generally, whenever Saihara's legs took up a notion to transform into a pair of limp noodles, he would sink himself into the nearest chair, couch, bed, etc. and stay there until he moped for long enough that the feeling finally meandered its way back to his extremities.

He had to find him.

Mastermind or not, after Ouma's theatrical reveal, there was no way that Saihara could leave him to his own devices somewhere alone in the school. Think. Just think, Saihara reminded himself, taking a deep breath in an attempt to calm the pounding in his chest. Not a day had gone by in which Saihara had failed to discover the whereabouts of Ouma's latest letter. Where would he have searched for the next note? Perhaps it was due to all the time he had spent in the school's casino, but Saihara would have been willing to lay down a bet that he would find Ouma if he could just reason it out.

The casino.

"Ah, my beloved Shumai," Ouma said cheerfully, as if nothing had ever happened. He didn't even bother to turn around, instead still diligently operating the steering wheel of the driving game. Somehow, Saihara didn't think that you were *supposed* to hit the pedestrians.

"You..." for someone who rarely knew what to say, suddenly a flood of words all rushed forth at once, piling up one against the other like children eager to be the first to enter the house of mirrors that was the mind of Ouma Kokichi.

Instead, Saihara marched over to the neighboring game cabinet, sliding shakily into the seat and grabbing the wheel until his knuckles turned white.

"You really sure you have time to be playing games right now?" Ouma asked curiously, cocking his head as he spared a glance beside him.

"If I win..." Saihara swallowed, the words pouring out like coffee over his tongue, bitter yet energizing in a way that made him jitter. "If I win, I want you to tell me if any of it was true."

"You mean like how I'm the mastermind and shit?"

"I mean the letters!" Saihara leapt up from the game, digging into his pockets and pulling out two handfuls of paper, which he let go, fluttering to the ground.

A 'game over' flashed across Ouma's screen. Finally, he turned to face Saihara, eyes wide and innocent. "Oh yeah. You caught me, Saihara-chan! I really do have a wicked pollen allergy, just like I wrote about!"

"You know which one I'm talking about." One letter remained crumpled in Saihara's fist.

'I think I'm really starting to like you!'

"That was a lie," he stated plainly.

Saihara fought the sinking in his heart. He knew deep down in his heart not to take anything Ouma said for face value. "So you really do... *like* me."

For a brief second, a flash of terror sparked on Ouma's face, and Saihara feared that he would run like always.

So he did the only thing that he could think to do.

Ouma was warm in his arms. Soft, and alive, and *human*. "I don't think you're really the mastermind," Saihara said into Ouma's hair, "And even if you were... I think that I might still feel the same."

#### YOU'RE WHAT I DREAM ABOUT WHEN I SLEEP

Kokichi Ouma hasn't woken up. Team Danganronpa has tasked Shuuichi Saihara with finding out what the problem may be.

"Do you think it'll work?"

"As with all of our technology, this is in its experimental stage. As a result, no guaranteed success. But nothing else we've tried has worked, and we'd rather not lose him..."

We. That's funny. As if any of you ever cared about him. "I'll do it, then."

Doused in smoke, he traverses through haunting woods, filled to the brim with trees lined up as if in a gathering and all watching him with multiple sets of bright eyes piercing through the dim glow. Each step, step, step brings about crunching underfoot, loud within the isolation framed by the foliage; and yet, the path he walks is cobblestone, as if specifically carved for the purpose of traversal. He'd barely seen it when he first entered this world; hovering around in the murky purple outside, he spent a good while searching around the perimeter of the trees in order to find some way to bring himself past them, as they shaped themselves to be impenetrable. Still, keen eyes and observation brought him to notice a trail of black and white stones, patterned as if gesturing, yearning, for them to be followed. Even with the occasional blotch sounding suspiciously like leaves when stepped upon, the further he went in, they remained visible, feeling, pulsating through his body with every time the sole of his shoe curled over one.

The farther in that Shuuichi traversed, the greater that the trees closed in upon him, gating him, as if they didn't want him to leave. Although he grips a flashlight within a trembling hand, he never notices the rushed movements that shift the branches within the dark until they appear within his peripheral vision, stealing his breath along with them. Each and every time, like clockwork, sound follows much like thunder following lightning in a thunderstorm, but from this distance, it's merely

nonsensical gurgling that scrapes the inside of his eardrum, like creatures stalk him in the dark, ready to pounce.

No going back, he tells himself. Sweaty palms aside, his legs keep pushing onward. No indication exists anywhere within his stiffened spine of a quitter. Not like I could anyway, with those trees blocking the way... But even if they weren't...

Just as he might have briefly entertained the thought that the forest is endless, in the distance his flashlight illuminates a tall structure, hidden behind the shelter of the forest's embrace, bright white and standing tall and proud in a sea of confusion and lack of clarity. Golden tops rising to the sky seemingly endlessly, reaching out triumphantly even above the sprinkles of cloudiness that shower the rest of the dark, they beckon with a demanded respect. And yet, as Shuuichi squints and approaches the fence lining the outside of its courtyard, there's a polish in it that's almost excessive, as if recently scrubbed to cover chipped paint left behind.

"You look like you saw a ghost."

By all intents and purposes, hadn't I, really? "Eh..."

"Aw, c'mon. Cheer up, Saihara-chan! Everything's all right now."

"Is that a lie?" I don't know why I said it.

"Hmm. Is it? I mean, I am a liar, after all. What do you think?"

The door takes little adjustment to budge; just the smallest nudge by Shuuichi's hand along the fleur-de-lis-shaped handle makes the twin doors spread welcomingly apart from each other, stretching like arms in a familiar greeting. As it yawns openly, it becomes apparent that the hallways that Shuuichi can peer into are already lit; as the wax slowly oozes down candles hanging on the walls by rusted chains,

the scent of lavender coaxes him further inward. This contrasts sharply with the *SLAM* of the door behind him upon entry, which ricochets off of the ornately decorated walls, which only barely drowns out his high-pitched hiccup.

What was that all about...?

A shaky breath between clenched teeth and a roll of his eyes permits Shuuichi to turn back to the door, and in his observation spot a note, childishly sticky-taped.

No flashlights, lanterns, strobe lights, or glow-in-thedark stickers, please! It ruins my vibes. Unless one of those things you have is a horse head, in which case, go ahead, but proceed with absolute caution. — (A crudely drawn heart shape) (A crudely drawn upside down smiley face) (A...red button? Is that a clown nose?) Ouma Kokichi

No note about flash photography? I guess strobe lights would cover that... Without my flashlight, it'd be really dark in here; those candles don't look like they'd be bright enough...

And yet, Shuuichi's thumb clicks it off, anyway; and in the process of obliging, blues, golds, and purple instantly splash the previous diluted white, crawling along the walls and inching beneath the red carpet scrolling out from the door, causing a twinkle and a glitter that momentarily blinds him to the point of blinking rapidly. It's as if flicking off the light used for his typical navigation of the world brought about the true color that the castle contains. Solid pillars framing the wall become more visible within this light, curled with flowery patterns; closer observation indicates irregularity in shape, as if the structural integrity had been rushed, and small indents within them depict the vague 'almost-but-not-quite' of various shapes, like stars, circles, and (of course, but why "of course"? As if it's expected to see them?) squares.

As the carpet underneath Shuuichi purrs with his movement, it doesn't escape his notice that some of the paint on the walls is peeling. This grows worse the further in he goes, with the tearing being especially bad when near paintings hung as if in a pattern. The paintings themselves more closely resemble enlarged cards from a deck rather than oil, with the faces

being distinguishable and clear. The frames that the paintings stay laminated within, striking and bold, contain indents in the corners of suits: hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds. More traveling brings the paintings themselves to appear runnier, as if the painting had been held up before it dried.

"Do you think it's possible to lie in a dream?"

"Eh? What's got you worked up all of a sudden, Saihara-chan?"

"... I don't know."

"Weeeeell... The dream itself is a lie, right? So I don't see how it wouldn't be"

"I guess you're right, Ouma-kun."

"You guess? I'm always right. You'll find that out soon enough."

The hall grows darker and darker, and the ceiling grows higher and higher. Pillars previously lined with frills and disorganized shapes become menacing, spiked. Magenta splotches trail down it as the gold becomes overwhelmed by blue, becoming deeper and deeper, as if Shuuichi submerged himself within ocean's depths. His breath grows heavier as the oppressive atmosphere seizes hold of his heart, the comforting scent of flowers being replaced by a metallic taste. Despite the large size of the room, an impending claustrophobia brings his heart to race, as the paintings previously depicting people fade to vague silhouettes, one of which with round ears that strike a sense of familiarity that he long since swallowed down. Previously the castle adorned itself with warmth, but now? Now, it's almost as if the forest outside overtook it, and it reminds him of the foreign entity that is his current surroundings.

A larger door presents itself at the end of this hallway, reaching toward the ceiling with gargoyles perched at its sides. Coated in black and purple, the door's handle itself doesn't resemble what would fit human hands; it's a gnarled claw, reaching to strike whoever may draw near or who may even so much as *attempt* to open it. Although no keyhole exists, a spot for it

drapes down from where the knob itself is located. It strikes Shuuichi, when he grows closer to the beast of an entryway, that the castle has no windows, something that became especially prudent when no escape options presented themselves.

The keen sense that he is being watched returns — and shortly becomes proven beyond a shred of doubt when a small felid-like shadow crawls on the floor around him, perching itself before the door.

"If you really were listening," the creature says; and it is the same voice as the gurgling tone Shuuichi heard earlier, he realizes, "Then you'd know I already told you how I feel."

And that's when it hits Shuuichi.

I can't be afraid. I need to keep going. No... He needs me to keep going.

"Do you have a game plan?"

"Yeah. We'll talk, I think."

"How will that work, exactly?"

"I don't know if it will to begin with. But we didn't do enough of that in the game, talking. Or rather... I think I didn't do enough listening. So maybe if I do it now, he'll wake up."

"And if he doesn't?"

"... Then at least someone heard him."

Shuuichi passes by the creature, delicately opening the door. It smiles behind him.

Instantly, he's greeted with a bright white room with a gentle fog, soft as though Shuuichi actually walks upon clouds. Within the steam, Ouma watches him with a broken smile. No nightmarish monster lurking within the dark, just him, arms curled around himself as if in a last-ditch defense.

When he entered, Shuuichi hadn't been sure what he would say. But now, the words come to him as if flowing from a stream.

"You love me the most, don't you? That's what you said."

Ouma nods. His eyes are unbearably glassy.

Despite the inhuman handle on his throne room's door, when Shuuichi takes him into his arms, Ouma is warm.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

Ouma drops his arms.



## SAIOUMA DOODLE PAGE







